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Reasonable Ecstasies: Shaftesbury and the Languages of Libertinism

Brian Cowan

Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713), would have recoiled at any implication that he was a libertine. His antipathy to libertinism is obvious, and examples are plentiful in his writings. His major work, the *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711), consistently uses the words “libertine” and “rake” as insults;¹ in all of his writings sensual pleasures are disparaged as base and animalistic threats to human virtue.² And despite the third earl’s widespread reputation as a freethinker in matters religious, he always insisted that liberty of thought did not imply a freedom from moral restraint.³

Certainly Shaftesbury’s early reputation was more that of a shy and unsociable recluse rather than that of a rakish *mondain*. In 1721, John Toland thought it necessary to defend his late friend from accusations of unsociability, not of licentiousness. He claimed that Shaftesbury’s enemies “gave out that he was too bookish, because not given to play, nor assiduous at court; that he was no good companion, because not a rake nor a hard drinker, and that he was no man of the world, because not

BRIAN COWAN is a graduate student at Princeton University. Helpful comments, criticism, and assistance have been provided by Adrienne Donald, Karen Harvey, Anore Horton, Lawrence Klein, Peter Lake, Markku Peltonen, Lawrence Stone, Victor Stater, Susan Whyman, an anonymous reviewer for the *Journal of British Studies*, and the audiences at Princeton University’s Women’s History and Early Modern and Renaissance colloquia and the Institute of Historical Research’s Long Eighteenth Century Seminar. Research for this article was made possible by a predoctoral research grant from the Andrew Mellon Foundation.

¹ Anthony Ashley Cooper, third earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. John M. Robertson, 2 vols. (1711; reprint, Indianapolis, 1964), 2:45, 346, 348. See also Shaftesbury, in Benjamin Rand, ed., *The Life, Unpublished Letters, and Philosophical Regimen of Anthony, Earl of Shaftesbury* (New York, 1900), pp. 37, 217, 247–48. Spelling and punctuation in quotations from all original sources have been modernized for consistency and clarity.

² For example, Rand, ed., *The Life*, pp. 119, 142, 163, 246, 247–48, 258, 270.

³ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 2:345–46; see also Rand, ed., *The Life*, p. 353.

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selfish nor open to bribes.” Toland also remarked how Shaftesbury frowned upon the “extravagant liberties” taken by “both sexes” even without having lived “to see masquerades, or the ancient Bacchanals revived, nor to hear of promiscuous clubs.”⁴ Indeed, Lord Ashley’s own private papers reveal that he was quite uncomfortable in the polite world of England’s social elite; he much preferred the pastoral tranquillity of his Dorset estate and the relaxed company of his most trusted friends.⁵

It would seem that the third earl was an unlikely libertine. Yet Shaftesbury did face accusations of libertinism from some of his more uncharitable contemporaries. His advocacy of the use of ridicule as a means both to discredit opponents and as a test for true doctrine in religious debates was widely criticized as support for all freethinkers and any who scoffed at the established church.⁶ This criticism could lead to accusations of sexual immorality, or at least hypocrisy. For example, Samuel Richardson’s *Lovelace* declares that “Lord Shaftesbury’s test . . . is a part of the rake’s creed.”⁷ And Henry Fielding’s Shaftesburian philosopher Square in *Tom Jones* (1749) is a rake at heart, albeit a rather inept one; for Square justifies his seduction of Molly Seagrim through an appeal to the demands of nature, thus implicitly accusing Shaftesbury and his ilk of hypocritical tractability in matters moral.⁸ Furthermore,

⁴ [John Toland], ed., *Letters from the Right Honourable the Late Earl of Shaftesbury to Robert Molesworth, Esq.; Now the Lord Viscount of That Name. With Two Letters Written by the Late Sir John Cropley. To Which Is Prefix’d a Large Introduction by the Editor*, 2d ed. (London, 1721), pp. viii, xiii; Toland was writing in the midst of anxiety over the blasphemous “Hell-Fire” club suppressed by royal proclamation on 28 April 1721, on which see Greater London Record Office (GLRO), MJ/OC/1, fols. 118r–20r; GLRO, WJ/OC/1, fol. 11v; *The Hell-Fire Club: Kept by a Society of Blasphemers* (London, 1721); Robert J. Allen, *The Clubs of Augustan London* (Cambridge, Mass., 1933), pp. 119–24.

⁵ Rand, ed., *The Life*, pp. 68, 107; cf. Lawrence Klein, “The Rise of Politeness in England, 1660–1714” (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1983), pp. 339, 396–97.

⁶ The majority of the titles listed in A. O. Aldridge’s compilation of references to Shaftesbury in the eighteenth century concern his thoughts on ridicule. See “Shaftesbury and the Deist Manifesto,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, n.s., 41, no. 2 (1951): 371–385. On Shaftesbury’s test of ridicule and its reception, see Nicholas Hudson, *Samuel Johnson and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 29–33; and John Redwood, *Reason, Ridicule, and Religion* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), pp. 39, 63–64, 182–83.

⁷ Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa; or, The History of a Young Lady*, 4 vols. (1748; reprint, London, 1932), 2:59.

⁸ Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones*, ed. Martin Battestin and Fredson Bowers, bk. 5, chap. 5 (1749; reprint, Oxford, 1974), 1:232–33. See also Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews*, ed. Douglas Brooks-Davies, (1742; reprint, Oxford, 1970), 3:3, 189–90; and Martin Battestin, *The Moral Basis of Fielding’s Art: A Study of Joseph Andrews* (Middletown, Conn., 1959), pp. 11–13.

recent Shaftesbury scholarship has begun to explore, tentatively, his vexed and complicated relationship to the languages of early enlightenment libertinism.

Shaftesbury's disregard for revealed religion and his unrelenting critique of the established church are well known, and these beliefs were certainly the occasion for most of the accusations of libertinism lodged against him.⁹ Yet Shaftesbury's religious freethinking, despite his own protestations to the contrary, was not wholly separate from sexual libertinism. Some critics now recognize that the bookish Shaftesbury did not shy away from discussing sexually transgressive behavior and beliefs.¹⁰ Indeed, Randolph Trumbach's important studies of male libertinism have claimed that "Shaftesbury himself had been a libertine" and, even more significantly, that "men like Congreve or Shaftesbury" provided new "ideals for the libertine in the early eighteenth century," thus replacing an older, unsentimental and bisexual, tradition of Restoration libertinism.¹¹

This remains, however, a minority view. Others, such as G. J. Barker-Benfield, contend that Shaftesbury hardly inaugurated a reformist strand *within* libertine thought but, rather, that he promoted "reformed

⁹ Justin Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and Its Enemies, 1660–1730* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 210–18; Lawrence Klein, "Shaftesbury, Politeness and the Politics of Religion," in *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain*, ed. Nicholas Phillipson and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 283–301, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral Discourse and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 154–74; Aldridge, "Shaftesbury and the Deist Manifesto." The relationship between religious free-thinking and sexual libertinism is insightfully explored in James G. Turner, "The Properties of Libertinism," in *'Tis Nature's Fault: Unauthorized Sexuality during the Enlightenment*, ed. Robert Purks Maccubbin (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 75–87, and "The Culture of Priapism," *Review* 10 (1988): 1–34.

¹⁰ A. O. Aldridge, "Shaftesbury's Rosicrucian Ladies," *Anglia: Zeitschrift für Englische Philologie* 103 (1985): 297–319. Shaftesbury excised many sexual references from the unauthorized 1699 publication of his *Inquiry concerning Virtue* when he edited it for inclusion as Treatise IV of the *Characteristics*. See Aldridge, "Two Versions of Shaftesbury's *Inquiry concerning Virtue*," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 13 (1950): 207–14.

¹¹ Randolph Trumbach, "Erotic Fantasy and Male Libertinism in Enlightenment England," in *The Invention of Pornography*, ed. Lynn Hunt (New York, 1993), pp. 270, 267; see also Trumbach, "Sodomy Transformed: Aristocratic Libertinage, Public Reputation and the Gender Revolution of the Eighteenth Century," in *Love Letters between a Certain Late Nobleman and the Famous Mr. Wilson*, ed. Michael S. Kimmel (New York, 1990), pp. 105–24, esp. 113–14, 123, n. 14. Similar claims for the emergence of a refined libertinism around the turn of the century, but associated with neo-epicureanism rather than Shaftesbury, are also made in Max Novak, *William Congreve* (New York, 1971), pp. 18–19, 41–51; and Harold Weber, *The Restoration Rake-Hero: Transformations in Sexual Understanding in Seventeenth-Century England* (Madison, Wis., 1986), pp. 91–97.

and tasteful manners” in a distinctly unlibertine sense: Shaftesbury was “a type literally antithetical to the Restoration type epitomized by Rochester.”¹² This account of Shaftesbury as an advocate for a reformation of male manners is more easily reconciled than Trumbach’s portrait with other recent studies of Shaftesbury’s role as the early eighteenth-century’s preeminent philosopher of “politeness.”¹³ Lawrence Klein has argued that “Shaftesbury’s sexuality was sufficiently attenuated or displaced that ‘the hankering after flesh’ merited only the occasional reprimand” in his private notebooks; hence his otherwise comprehensive studies lack any further discussion of the role of eroticism or gender in Shaftesbury’s philosophy.¹⁴ There is a similar lacuna in those studies which emphasize the republican and neo-Harringtonian aspects of Shaftesbury’s thought.¹⁵

Aside from being the grandson of the grandfather of English whiggism, the third earl of Shaftesbury is now best known as the author of the three volumes of his *Characteristics*, a work first published in 1711, only two years before his death. While the *Characteristics* has long been recognized as an important work in the history of ethical and aesthetic thought, most recent interest in the third earl has focused on the political, religious, and cultural inflections of the third earl’s whig ideology adumbrated in that work. He has, in particular, and in conjunction with such Augustan contemporaries as Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, come

¹² G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago, 1992), pp. 96, 112.

¹³ Aside from the path-breaking works of Klein cited *passim*, see E. J. Hundert, *The Enlightenment’s “Fable”: Bernard Mandeville and the Discovery of Society* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 122–26; David Solkin, “Re-Wrighting Shaftesbury: The *Air Pump* and the Limits of Commercial Humanism,” in *Early Modern Conceptions of Property*, ed. John Brewer and Susan Staves (New York, 1995), pp. 234–53, esp. 241–42; Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1994), pp. 121–26; and Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 175. Shaftesbury is conspicuously absent in Nicholas Phillipson, “Politics and Politeness: Anne and the Early Hanoverians,” in *The Varieties of British Political Thought, 1500–1800*, ed. J. G. A. Pocock (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 211–45, *Hume*, (London, 1989), chap. 2 (p. 27 notwithstanding), and “Propriety, Property, and Prudence: David Hume and the Defense of the Revolution,” in Phillipson and Skinner, eds., *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain*, esp. pp. 308–11—perhaps because Shaftesbury’s notions of politeness were far more rarefied than those adumbrated by Addison and Steele.

¹⁴ Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness*, p. 76, n. 17, “Liberty, Manners and Politeness in Early Eighteenth-Century England,” *Historical Journal* 32, no. 3 (1989): 583–605.

¹⁵ Champion, *Pillars*; A. B. Worden, “Introduction,” in *A Voyage from the Watch Tower, Part Five: 1660–1662*, ed. A. B. Worden, Camden Fourth Series, vol. 21 (London, 1978), pp. 1–84.

to be understood as a major proponent of a whiggish culture of “politeness” that sought to relocate the locus of cultural authority in post-1688 Britain away from its traditional moorings in the court and the church and ground it firmly in an independent public sphere composed of appropriately genteel, polished, and urbane individuals.¹⁶ The third earl of Shaftesbury, in this view, was as ideologically important for the whigs of Queen Anne’s reign as the first earl was organizationally important for the “first whigs” of Charles II’s reign.¹⁷

The third earl’s understanding of human sociability and sexuality complicates this view of his philosophy and its importance to the formation of a postrevolutionary whig ideology. For the question—was Lord Anthony Ashley Cooper a libertine?—remains unresolved. How should his sexuality be understood in relation to his advocacy of “politeness” in political and social relations? In the following, I shall argue that Shaftesbury’s sexual philosophy was decisively shaped by the social and political contexts in which he expressed it. The *Characteristics* reflects the anxieties of a country whig alienated from both the old cultural capital of court society and the newly emergent cultural capital located in metropolitan London. Furthermore, these anxieties were significantly gendered. Shaftesbury’s old fashioned “country” abhorrence of the uxoriousness and corrupt luxury of court culture could be replicated when he referred to what he viewed as the superficial and dissembling mores of a female-dominated polite society in which mixed company was the rule. In both cases, he found a dangerous effeminacy that threatened masculine virtue. By contrast, he did not consider homosociality, and perhaps even homosexuality, as effeminate at all. Manliness and virtue were almost synonymous for the third earl, as they were for many of his seventeenth-century republican predecessors.¹⁸ Shaftesbury’s belief in the moral superiority of exclusive and intimate male companionship structured both the ways in which he maintained his actually existing friendships and the philosophic rhetoric he used to articulate his ethical, social, and political ideals.

¹⁶ See the works cited in note 13 above.

¹⁷ The first earl of Shaftesbury’s role in the formation of a whig identity has recently undergone significant revision; see Tim Harris, *London Crowds in the Reign of Charles II* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 100; Jonathan Scott, *Algernon Sidney and the Restoration Crisis, 1677–1683* (Cambridge, 1991), esp. pp. 13–14; and Mark Knights, *Politics and Opinion in Crisis, 1678–1681*, (Cambridge, 1994), esp. pp. 107, 131–34.

¹⁸ Hannah Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984), remains the most detailed case study of the role of gender in republican political discourse. But see also Rachel Weil, “Sexual Ideology and Political Propaganda in England, 1678–1714” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1991), esp. chap. 2.

I. “To Be a Man, and a Lover of Men’’: Philosophy and Homosociality

Shaftesbury’s world revolved around men. His correspondence with women was sparse and remained almost entirely restricted to family matters, pleasantries, and the exchange of favors.¹⁹ He entered into marriage only reluctantly and at the urging of his friends, who insisted that preserving the Shaftesbury lineage was necessary to further the political interests of his country whig allies. For his own part, Lord Ashley complained that “one who prefers tranquillity, and a little study, and a few friends, to all other advantages of life, and all the flatteries of ambition and fame, is not like to be naturally so very fond of engaging in the circumstances of marriage.”²⁰

The third earl chose his friends carefully; he told Robert Molesworth that there were only “two or three friends, whom, besides yourself, I pretend to call by that name.”²¹ Certainly, his two closest friends were Sir John Cropley, Baronet (1663–1713) and Thomas Micklethwayte (1678–1718).²² While Cropley accompanied Shaftesbury on his grand tour in 1687–89, Micklethwayte appears to have met the Lord Ashley in London in the 1690s.²³ This circle, as it were, may have occasionally included a few other intimates, such as his whig compatriots Lord John Somers (1651–1716), Lieutenant-General James Stanhope (1672–1721), or Sir John Molesworth (1679–1726), the son of Sir Robert.²⁴ It is impossible to determine definitively the extent of Shaftesbury’s circle because of his understandable reluctance to name names when referring to the brothers of his club—and much of their correspondence may have been

¹⁹ Rand, ed., *The Life*, pp. 301, 303–5, 321–22, 341, 408, 433; cf. Robert Voitle, *The Third Earl of Shaftesbury, 1671–1713* (Baton Rouge, La., 1984), p. 284.

²⁰ [Toland], ed., *Letters*, pp. xiii, 3, 10; cf. Rand, *The Life*, pp. 391 ff. Shaftesbury’s two attempts at courtship and marriage are discussed in Voitle, *The Third Earl*, pp. 283–310. Trumbach uses Shaftesbury’s reluctance to marry as evidence for his contention that the earl “fit into the pattern of the traditional bisexual libertine,” in “Sodomy Transformed,” p. 113; cf. Voitle, *The Third Earl*, p. 242.

²¹ [Toland], ed., *Letters*, p. 41.

²² See, e.g., Voitle, *The Third Earl*, p. 196.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19, 196, n. 34.

²⁴ See Shaftesbury’s use of “enthusiasm” as an identifier of inclusion within an esoteric club including Lord Somers in Rand, ed., *The Life*, pp. 386, 394, 420, 430. Shaftesbury sent copies of his works and shared his philosophy with Stanhope (*ibid.*, pp. 413–16), who was also made an executor of Shaftesbury’s estate (Voitle, *The Third Earl*, p. 248, n. 49). Shaftesbury remarks on his friendships with both Robert and John Molesworth in Rand, ed., *The Life*, p. 520. Voitle discusses Shaftesbury’s friendships with Somers and Stanhope in *The Third Earl*, pp. 67, 170, 196, 241–42, 260, 302–3, 307–8, 324, 407–8. William L. Sachse, *Lord Somers: A Political Portrait* (Manchester, 1975), has little to say about Somers’s relationship with Shaftesbury.

destroyed²⁵—but one can discern a notable difference between the familiarity of style in Shaftesbury's correspondence with these men and his more formal tone used in correspondence with his companions in the Republic of Letters, such as Benjamin Furly, Jean LeClerc, and Pierre Coste. Within Shaftesbury's coterie of these few male friends, he felt most free to express himself and his philosophy. Among his intimates he felt he could be "truly sociable, retaining true simplicity and gravity" and thus free from "all those forms and manners which come under the notion of good breeding," with no need for "embroidery, gilding, coloring."²⁶

He thought that the presence of women was especially conducive to such ridiculous imposture, and thus mixed company could only inspire primitive pleasures and improper judgment. He found the "vile ribaldry and other gross irregularities" of the theater primarily owing to pandering to the baser tastes of the females in the audience. He thought the Greeks' prohibition of women from their theater and gymnasiums was quite admirable, while the Romans' practice of permitting women into their amphitheaters was a primary cause of the barbarities of gladiatorial entertainment. Even worse, he thought, men of normally good judgment often "give way with a malicious complaisance to the humour of a company, where, in favour chiefly of the tender sex," they might yield to criticism.²⁷

Rather than sacrifice his thought to the whims of fashion and the beau monde, Shaftesbury declared that it was "a better thing to be just, to have integrity, faith, innocency, to be a man, and a lover of men."²⁸ He thus resigned himself to sharing his work with a carefully chosen handful of male confidants. Among them was Lord John Somers, Queen Anne's Lord High Chancellor, to whom Shaftesbury sent advance copies of his writings. In a letter enclosed with a copy of "The Sociable Enthusiast" [1704?] (later to be titled "The Moralists"), he complained: "Philosophy has not the honor to be owned by men of note or breeding, and the author [i.e., Shaftesbury, has] . . . been hard put to it to contrive what persons . . . , upon whom he might father his philosophy. At last he e'en desperately ventured it with the younger men, and laid his scene

²⁵ None of Stanhope's letters to Shaftesbury have survived; see Voitle, *The Third Earl*, pp. 247–48, esp. n. 49.

²⁶ Rand, ed., *The Life*, pp. 181, 179; cf. pp. 68, 107, 247–48. Shaftesbury's concerns with the falseness of theatricality in social life are discussed in Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness*, pp. 72–80, 90–96. See also David Marshall, *The Figure of Theater: Shaftesbury, Defoe, Adam Smith, and George Eliot* (New York, 1986), pp. 1–70; and Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, pp. 162–69.

²⁷ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 1:177–78; cf. 2:315, 1:178–179, 2:258.

²⁸ Rand, ed., *The Life*, p. 112.

in the midst of gallantry and pleasure. For gallantry and ladies must have a part in everything that passes for polite in our age. The worse luck for us. It shows our Gothic extract.” Indeed, Shaftesbury further declares that “since ladies have had to do out of their chambers . . . philosophy has gone to wreck, and there has been sad havoc among the men of sense.”²⁹

In contrast to what he perceived to be the Gothic depravity of polite heterosociality, Shaftesbury preferred the “liberty of *the club*, and . . . that sort of freedom which is taken amongst gentlemen and friends who know one another perfectly well.”³⁰ It must be remembered that Shaftesbury’s conception of true politeness was an idiosyncratic and highly esoteric one; his misogyny set him apart from the discursive mainstream on polite sociability.³¹ Whereas Jonathan Swift claimed that English politeness reached its apogee at the court of Charles I, because women there tempered “the rudeness of our northern genius,” and Joseph Addison thought that “women were formed to temper mankind, and sooth them into tenderness and compassion,” or David Hume announces that “love, when properly managed, is the source of all politeness and refinement,” Shaftesbury would have none of this pandering to the “lady fancies.”³²

While he openly disdained the false sociability of mixed company, Shaftesbury celebrated the virtues of “private friendship” in his “*Sensus Communis*” (1709). For Lord Ashley, such friendship went far beyond

²⁹ Ibid., p. 337; cf. pp. 416–17; Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 2:11; and R. A. Barrell, ed., *Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713) and ‘Le Refuge Français’ Correspondence* (Lewiston, N.Y., 1989), pp. 242–43. Shaftesbury’s devaluation of Gothic virtue, against the discursive grain of his republican contemporaries, is discussed in Klein, “Liberty, Manners and Politeness,” pp. 593–605.

³⁰ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 1:53; Shaftesbury also refers to his coterie as a “club” in Rand, ed., *The Life*, p. 440.

³¹ Although Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness*, p. 37, notes the differences between Shaftesbury and Addison, the main thrust of his studies has been to emphasize “the important similarities” between Shaftesbury and the *Spectator* project; see esp. pp. 8–14, 36–41; and Lawrence Klein, “Property and Politeness in the Early Eighteenth-Century Whig Moralists,” in Brewer and Staves, eds., *Early Modern Conceptions of Property*, p. 221; but cf. Klein, “Gender, Conversation and the Public Sphere,” in *Textuality and Sexuality: Reading Theories and Practices*, ed. Judith Still and Michael Worton (Manchester, 1993), p. 109, in which Shaftesbury’s homosocial ideal is acknowledged.

³² Jonathan Swift, “Essay on Conversation,” in *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Herbert Davis et al. (Oxford, 1957), 4:95; Joseph Addison, in *The Spectator*, no. 57 (5 May 1711), ed. G. Gregory Smith (London, 1907), 1:213; David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis, 1985), p. 215; Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 1:202. Compare Saint-Evremond, *Miscellany Essays* (London, 1694), p. 164. See Adam Potkay, *The Fate of Eloquence in the Age of Hume* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1994), pp. 74–84, on the importance of *le commerce des femmes* for early eighteenth-century English discourse on politeness.

“that common benevolence and charity which every Christian is obliged to show towards all men”; it is rather to be understood as a “peculiar relation which is formed by a consent and harmony of minds, by mutual esteem, and reciprocal tenderness and affection” which surpasses the love of women. His examples include the friendships between “philosophers, heroes, and the greatest of men,” such as those of Socrates and Antisthenes, Plato and Dion, or Cato and Brutus. Although a few such bonds survive “perhaps in our own age,” Shaftesbury intimates that his ideal flourished only in “the heathen world, or in the times preceding Christianity.”³³

Among his favored confidants, Lord Ashley shared a language of intimate affection and indeed, gallantry. In his correspondence with his “real and passionate friend,” Robert Molesworth, Shaftesbury requested permission to “allow a lover to speak in lover’s language.” It was in a context such as this that Shaftesbury felt he could freely “mix love and philosophy.”³⁴ Male friendships infused with a hardly concealed homoeroticism were the preferred venues for the third earl’s philosophizing.

Molesworth was not unique in receiving such warm praises and affectionate prose. Perhaps the most striking instance in which Shaftesbury uses this rhetoric is in a letter containing reflections on male friendship and his past love for a boy.³⁵ In this carefully preserved and copied, albeit incomplete, epistle addressed “to a brother,” Shaftesbury reflects on his past affairs with a young man, whom he calls “a *Bawble* in good truth, if ever there were a *Bawble* of a *friend*.”³⁶ Ashley seems to have met the boy at a gathering of his “private community of friends.” He recalls how his first reaction was a “*je-ne-sais-quoi* of dislike and aversion,” despite the youth’s attempts to secure the friendship. Shaftesbury “refused as much to send him one good wish . . . one kind remembrance or anything in return, either to his own friend-like remembrances and officious tender of services, or to the favourable characters given him

³³ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 1:67–68, n. 1.

³⁴ [Toland], ed., *Letters*, pp. 12, 26, 34.

³⁵ Public Record Office (PRO), Shaftesbury to a brother, 22 January 1704/5, PRO 30/24/20/110, fols. 274r–275v. The letter was first brought to attention by Shaftesbury’s biographer, Voitle, *The Third Earl*, pp. 242–45.

³⁶ PRO 30/24/20/110, fol. 274r (all emphases in quotations from this letter are in the original MS); Voitle, *The Third Earl*, p. 244, assumes that the boy’s name was indeed “Bawble,” but A. O. Aldridge, in his review of Voitle, *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 19 (1985–86): 258, suggests the more likely possibility that this was Shaftesbury’s pseudonymic invention. It is just as likely that the letter was not intended for Shaftesbury’s brother Maurice, but for one of his close friends, perhaps Thomas Micklethwayte or Sir John Cropley.

by all that were then about him, [from] witnessing his generous behavior to making apologies to me for his seeming rake-hell character.”³⁷ Here we find a rather unguarded explanation of how one qualified to join Shaftesbury’s select coterie. It required good references from others, a certain reciprocity of favors and services, a civil disposition, and finally, Shaftesbury’s own *on ne sais quoi* of approval.

Ultimately, Lord Ashley did approve of his new acquaintance. “At length,” he writes “time, custom, familiar appellations, names, manners, with a hundred little things (such is human nature) began to work on me.” He began to make “professions of [his] heart.” And “the *Bawble* gained.” Their intimacy grew, as Shaftesbury reveals: “I played too; awkward as I was, and grown grave. With play came in things serious. Then vows, professions, services, endearing actions; till my easy breast quite opened as I received him in, after the long resistance I had made.”³⁸ The story is remarkable for its candid display of emotion and affect, and it does resemble a sort of seduction narrative in which Shaftesbury yields to the Bawble’s advances. Perhaps this explains why all critical commentary on this letter has centered around its status as evidence for Shaftesbury’s homosexuality.³⁹

Whether or not Shaftesbury had sex with “Bawble” or any of his other intimate friends, we will never know. What is clear is that Shaftesbury’s friendships were infused with a homoerotic passion that was real enough even if never consummated. Alan Bray has rightly insisted that the distinction between male friendship and sodomitical sexuality was never as firm in early modern England as contemporaries might have insisted.⁴⁰ Intense friendships could often be portrayed by unfriendly witnesses as sinfully sodomitical, or at least something close to it. Thus Francis Bacon, for example, showed great concern to distinguish the vice of “masculine love” from the “faithful and inviolate friendships”

³⁷ PRO 30/24/20/110, fols. 274v–275r. Shaftesbury’s displeasure with “rake-hell” libertinism is not out of character but significant nevertheless in this context.

³⁸ PRO 30/24/20/110, fol. 275r.

³⁹ Voitle simply declares, “That Shaftesbury would cherish a letter that consciously revealed him as a homosexual is inconceivable,” in *The Third Earl*, p. 244, while Trumbach asserts the contrary in “Sodomy Transformed,” p. 115.

⁴⁰ Alan Bray, “Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England,” *History Workshop Journal* 29 (1990): 1–20; this article emends his own earlier distinction in *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (Boston, 1982), pp. 60–62. A similar situation obtained among the early modern French aristocracy, according to Jonathan Dewald, *Aristocratic Experience and the Origins of Modern Culture: France, 1570–1715*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1993), pp. 117–20. The varieties of homosexuality and homosociality are usefully explored in G. S. Rousseau, “The Pursuit of Homosexuality in the Eighteenth Century,” in Maccubbin, ed., *’Tis Nature’s Fault*, pp. 132–69.

between the men of Bensalem in his *New Atlantis* (1627), as Michel de Montaigne did in his *Essais* (1580).⁴¹

Shaftesbury himself clearly saw his own friendships as something distinct from sodomy. It is true that he occasionally speaks plainly of love for boys or other men, both in the Bawble letter and elsewhere.⁴² But he just as definitively denounces “unnatural and monstrous lusts, [which respect] neither sex nor species.”⁴³ Shaftesbury’s well-known asthmatic disorders and general poor health would have hindered his ability to play the role of a rakish libertine even if he had desired to do so.⁴⁴ It is likely that physical sexuality played an insignificant part in his friendships with other men. It is indubitable that homoeroticism, however idealized, was central to those friendships.

The privileged character of Shaftesbury’s friendships with his intimates can be further understood when they are contrasted with his account of some encounters with a group of esoteric “adepts,” both male and female, who practice alchemy and prophecy; the women claimed to have sexual relations with spirits. This text, a satire entitled “The Adept Ladys or the ANGELICK SECT” (1701/2) remained in manuscript, although Shaftesbury had several copies made by his amanuenses and obviously allowed them to circulate among his “brothers.”⁴⁵ This letter has been called a “libertine fantasy,” presumably because of its subject matter, but it is much more akin to Shaftesbury’s published “Letter concerning Enthusiasm” (1708), at least insofar as it ridicules the “villainous imposture and enthusiastic cant” of the adepts. In “The Adept Ladys,” the false “enthusiasm,” the “high raptures,” and “ecstasies” of the adepts’ superstition are all maligned. Shaftesbury found it particularly distressing that these ladies, or “she-sages,” had succeeded in converting

⁴¹ Brian Vickers, ed., *Francis Bacon* (Oxford, 1996), p. 477. Bacon himself was later accused of sodomy: Bray, “Male Friendship,” pp. 14–15. Donald M. Frame, ed., *The Complete Essays of Montaigne* (Stanford, Calif., 1958), p. 138.

⁴² Rand, ed., *The Life*, pp. 163, 218; Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 2:38–39.

⁴³ Shaftesbury, *An Inquiry concerning Virtue, or Merit* (1699 ed.) in *Standard Edition of the Complete Works of . . . the Third Earl of Shaftesbury*, ed. Gerd Hemmerich and Wolfram Bends (Stuttgart, 1981), 2:2, 285 (p. 175 in original). Compare Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 1:314, 2:348.

⁴⁴ Shaftesbury’s ailments hindered his marriage prospects, and were apparently so severe that Lady Wentworth’s first impression of him was that “he looks as if he was very short lived.” J. J. Cartwright, ed., *The Wentworth Papers, 1705–1739* (London, 1883), p. 60.

⁴⁵ Shaftesbury, *The Adept Ladys or the ANGELICK SECT: Being the Matters of Fact of Certain Adventures Spiritual, Philosophical, Political and Gallant*, in Hemmerich and Bends, eds., *Standard Edition*, 1:2, 378–442. The letter is addressed “Dear Brother.” See also the account in Voitle, *The Third Earl*, pp. 198–200.

some of his male friends.⁴⁶ He thought that women were particularly prone to superstitious enthusiasm, because religious fanaticism provoked “something strangely agreeable, and in common with what ordinary lovers are used to feel” in its converts.⁴⁷ He contemptuously juxtaposed the adepts against “those ancient heathens who steered that rugged and severe course to virtue through self denial and the contempt of all the soft pleasures and shining beauties of the world.”⁴⁸

Shaftesbury’s concerns in this text reappear throughout the *Characteristics*, for he continually uses the exact same terms—enthusiasm, rapture, and ecstasy—to describe his own philosophy. It is therefore of the utmost importance for him to distinguish his own philosophical enthusiasm, and perhaps his own philosophical brotherhood, from the adepts’ superstition. Unlike the adepts, Shaftesbury thought that philosophy could flourish only among those men who followed the “rugged and severe course” paved by their classical forefathers. Reason, rather than superstition or pleasure, provided the basis for truly virtuous sociability. Shaftesbury would have been much more comfortable with John Toland’s rarefied “form of celebrating the Socratic society” described in his *Pantheisticon* (Latin ed., 1720; English trans., 1751), although even Toland seemed to be slightly more willing than was Lord Ashley to admit women into his circles.⁴⁹

He faced a similar problem with respect to libertinism: how should he distinguish his philosophical brotherhood from the libertine transgressions of rakes and sodomites? The homoeroticism of Shaftesbury’s private correspondence is just as pervasive in his carefully crafted published works. Furthermore, Shaftesbury discusses issues favored by many of his putatively libertine contemporaries, from religious skepticism to illicit sexuality and the nature of pleasure and desire. And he does so with a raffish style that would not have been unfamiliar to readers of Saint-Évremond or Sir William Temple, Shaftesbury’s erudite and libertine

⁴⁶ Trumbach, “Sodomy Transformed,” p. 113; cf. Trumbach, “Erotic Fantasy,” p. 270; Shaftesbury, *Adept Ladys*, pp. 396, 404, 390, 410, 422, 386; Aldridge persuasively argues that the adepts were Rosicrucians and, less convincingly, that the text reflects his break with John Toland, in “Shaftesbury’s Rosicrucian Ladies.”

⁴⁷ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 2:179.

⁴⁸ Shaftesbury, *Adept Ladys*, p. 420.

⁴⁹ John Toland, *Pantheisticon* (1721; reprint, London, 1751), p. 64. The importance of esoteric communication for Shaftesbury’s unreliable friend and client John Toland is stressed in Stephen H. Daniel, *John Toland: His Methods, Manners, and Mind* (Kingston and Montreal, 1984), pp. 176–85. Shaftesbury’s vexed relationship with Toland is documented in F. H. Heinemann, “John Toland and the Age of Reason,” *Archiv für Philosophie* 4, no. 1 (September 1950): 35–66, and A. B. Worden, “Introduction,” pp. 42–55.

contemporaries.⁵⁰ Yet the third earl explicitly condemned the neo-Epicurean ethics and the philosophical egoism of these philosophers. We can understand Shaftesbury's relationship to libertinism only by asking how he saw his own thinking as distinct from that of his libertine contemporaries.

II. Problematic Pleasures: Eroticism and Shaftesbury's Ethics

It is perhaps improper to speak of a libertine tradition of thought. Nevertheless, recent studies have begun to map out some major themes which may be usefully identified as "libertine." Central to all varieties of erotic libertinism is a valorization of sexual activity itself, especially in a way which legitimizes sexual promiscuity.⁵¹ James Turner has explored the ways in which the court cultures of Louis XIV in France and Charles II in England fostered a cult of erotic heroism and sublimity which continued to influence sexual ideology well into the eighteenth century.⁵² Others have stressed an important sea change in the character of libertine thinking around the end of the seventeenth century. In this

⁵⁰ Clara Marburg, *Sir William Temple: A Seventeenth Century "Libertin"* (New Haven, Conn., 1932); The libertinism of Saint-Évremond, especially as expressed in his essays "Sur la morale d'épicure," and "Sur les plaisirs," in *Oeuvres en prose*, ed. René Ternois, 4 vols. (Paris: Librairie M. Didier, 1962–69), 3:425–438; 4:12–23, awaits detailed scrutiny, but see Paul Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne, 1680–1715* (Paris, 1961), pp. 120–26; René Pintard, *Le libertinage érudit dans la première moitié du XVIII^e siècle* (1943; reprint, Geneva, 1983), pp. 326–27; J. S. Spink, *French Free-Thought from Gassendi to Voltaire* (London, 1960), p. 143; Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment*, 2 vols. (1966; reprint, New York, 1977), 1:308; N. J. Rigaud, *George Etherege: Dramaturge de la restauration anglaise*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1980), 1:30, 335; and Dewald, *Aristocratic Experience*, pp. 133–34. On Saint-Évremond's contemporary libertine reputation, see the "epitaph" in British Library (BL), Additional MS 40060, fol. 30r.

⁵¹ The erotic libertinism with which I am concerned here is distinct from the vicious "rake-hell" libertinism discussed in Daniel Statt, "The Case of the Mohocks: Rake Violence in Augustan London," *Social History* 20, no. 2 (May 1995): 179–99. It may, however, be considered the theory which led to the practice of some varieties of sexually deviant behavior, on which see Lawrence Stone, "Libertine Sexuality in Post-Restoration England: Group Sex and Flagellation among the Middling Sort in Norwich in 1706–07," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 2, no. 4 (1992): 511–26.

⁵² James G. Turner, "The Libertine Sublime: Love and Death in Restoration England," *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture* 19 (1989): 99–115, "Sex and Consequence," *Review* 11 (1989): 133–77, "Pope's Libertine Self-Fashioning," *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 29, no. 2 (1988): 123–44, "The Properties of Libertinism," "The Culture of Priapism," and "Illustrious Depravity" and the Erotic Sublime," in *The Age of Johnson*, ed. Paul Korshin, vol. 2 (New York, 1989). Rachel Weil explores erotic heroism in Restoration political satire in "Sometimes a Scepter Is Only a Scepter," in Hunt, ed., *The Invention of Pornography*, pp. 125–53.

scheme, the crude, purely appetitive libertinism of the Restoration era was replaced by the refined and erudite libertinism of the early Enlightenment. Libertine rakes like Rochester thus gave way to libertine *philosophes* like Congreve, William Temple, or perhaps, Shaftesbury.⁵³

Now if the third earl was a libertine, he was certainly an unusual one, since he rejected the baroque libertinism of court culture, and his ethics were aimed at refuting the neo-epicurean libertinism of men like Saint-Évremond or William Temple—or a fortiori, the materialist egoism of a Hobbes or a Rochester.⁵⁴ Shaftesbury did indeed valorize sexuality in a way which can be considered a sort of erotic heroism, but his manner of doing so was highly idiosyncratic. For Shaftesbury, eroticism was literally all in the head. It was less concerned with orgasmic ecstasy or sexual conquest than it was with the pleasures of philosophy. His *eros* derived from both Stoic and Platonic valuations of right reason over sensual pleasure; *eros* was about desire, and desire for wisdom and virtue above all.⁵⁵ He could therefore castigate those philosophers who made pleasure, or voluptuousness, the foundation for their ethics, while also describing his philosophy with many of the same tropes used by his libertine contemporaries. His characters, like his friends, are called “lovers.” They all court “a Venus of one kind or another” and contemplate the natural order with “ravishment,” “ecstasy,” and “rapture,” while the pleasure of philosophical sociability is “more debauching than any other.”⁵⁶

The eroticism of his philosophical rhetoric is unmistakable, yet Shaftesbury’s discussions of physical sexuality range from temperate acceptance to passionate outbursts of disgust. He speaks of sexual desire as

⁵³ Novak, *Congreve*, pp. 18–19, 41–51; Weber, *The Restoration Rake-Hero*, pp. 91–97; Roy Porter, “Mixed Feelings: The Enlightenment and Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century Britain,” in *Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, ed. Paul-Gabriel Boucé (Manchester, 1982), pp. 1–27, and “Libertinism and Promiscuity,” in *Don Giovanni: Myths of Seduction and Betrayal*, ed. Jonathan Miller (New York, 1990), pp. 1–20; Robert Hume, “The Myth of the Rake in Restoration Comedy,” in *The Rakish Stage* (Carbondale, Ill., 1980), pp. 138–75; on Shaftesbury, see Trumbach, “Erotic Fantasy,” pp. 267–82.

⁵⁴ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 1:79. On Shaftesbury’s critique of court culture and his anti-epicureanism, respectively, see Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness*, pp. 175–94, 60–69.

⁵⁵ Shaftesbury’s platonism is emphasized in Ernst Cassirer, *The Platonic Renaissance in England*, trans. James P. Pettegrove (Austin, 1953), pp. 157–202; Stanley Grean, *Shaftesbury’s Philosophy of Religion and Ethics: A Study in Enthusiasm* (Athens, Ohio, 1967), esp. pp. 32–36, and “Introduction,” in Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, pp. xxii–xxiii; John A. Bernstein, *Shaftesbury, Rousseau, and Kant* (Cranbury, N.J., 1980), pp. 21–60. Shaftesbury’s stoicism is emphasized in Champion, *Pillars*, pp. 210–18; and Aldridge, “Shaftesbury and the Deist Manifesto,” esp. 330–41.

⁵⁶ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 2:3, 1:92, 2:12, 1:279, 2:36.

“venery” and considers it a motivating passion in the *Inquiry concerning Virtue* (1699; rev. ed., 1711). Venery is part of the natural order, and its proper function is to propagate the species. Hence it is strictly heterosexual. Adherence to Galenic physiology leads Lord Ashley to state that “to abstain wholly from the use of venery . . . can hardly be without the suffrance of the body in some degree.”⁵⁷ But this admission of the necessity of venery for reproduction is far removed from Rochester’s famous libertine maxim that “all pleasure . . . [may] be indulged as the gratification of our natural appetites,” for Shaftesbury declares that “it will hardly be thought that there is no limit, bound, or certain measure of . . . appetite towards venery: as if this were independent of nature, and might extend to infinite, and still be the occasion of greater and greater pleasure; which is too great an absurdity to go about to confute.”⁵⁸ He could not have condemned the excessive sexual desire valorized as sublime by some of his libertine contemporaries with more vehemence, but he stops short of actually engaging with their claims. Instead, he goes on to argue that natural venery is always in danger of “unnatural provocation and youthful incitements of a vicious education.” Such corruption leads to “all horridness of unnatural and monstrous lusts,” so that “the more these excessive desires are thus increased, and the unnatural appetite fomented, the less is there of a real pleasant sensation, and the more mixture there is of allay. For . . . a sensation which seems to hold all of pleasure, often by a small and almost imperceptible extension runs into pain, and grows insufferable.”⁵⁹

Sexuality for Shaftesbury requires constant self-discipline and must always conform to what he understands to be the natural order. Unnatural pleasure, he believes, is not even real pleasure at all, because the undesir-

⁵⁷ Shaftesbury, *An Inquiry* (1699) in Hemmerich and Bends, eds., *Standard Edition*, 2:2, 279 (p. 173 in original). Compare Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 1:12, 16, 74; Rand, ed., *The Life*, pp. 404–5; and Shaftesbury to Arent Furley, 5 December 1705 in T. Forster, ed., *Original Letters of John Locke, Algernon Sidney and Lord Shaftesbury* (1847; reprint, Bristol, 1990), p. 170. Galenic attitudes to sexuality are discussed in Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (1984; reprint, New York, 1986), pp. 105–44; Aline Rouselle, *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity*, trans. Felicia Pheasant (1983; reprint, Oxford, 1988), esp. p. 19; Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 1988), pp. 19–20; and Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), pp. 35–49, 103.

⁵⁸ Gilbert Burnet, *Some Passages of the Life and Death of Rochester* (1680) in *Rochester: The Critical Heritage*, ed. David Farley-Hills (London, 1972), p. 57; Shaftesbury, *An Inquiry*, (1699) in Hemmerich and Bends, eds., *Standard Edition*, 2:2, 281 (pp. 174–75 in original).

⁵⁹ Shaftesbury, *An Inquiry* (1699) in Hemmerich and Bends, eds., *Standard Edition*, 2:2, 283 (p. 176 in original), 2:2, 285, (pp. 177–78 in original). Compare Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 1:250, 311.

able consequences of debauchery are manifold: one risks disease, “waste of time, the effeminacy, sloth, supineness engendered, the disorder, looseness, and impotence of a thousand passions, through such a relaxation and enervating of the mind.”⁶⁰ It is hard to imagine how he could have voiced a stronger condemnation of the libertine sexuality of his contemporaries. Erotic sublimity for the third earl was clearly not to be found in physical sexuality. Where others found vigor, a source of creativity, and a means to assert heroically one’s masculinity through excessive sexual activity, Shaftesbury could only find effeminacy and corruption.

Pleasure’s relationship to virtue is central to Lord Ashley’s ethics, as one would expect from one so enamored with the Stoics. And like the Stoics, Shaftesbury asserts that pleasure in itself is to be wholly rejected as a worthwhile pursuit.⁶¹ A passage in his philosophical notebook asks: “Is it plain . . . that an army ever so brave . . . is presently corrupted by pleasure? . . . Is every soldier less a soldier for having fallen in love, caressed a mistress or a boy with fondness; for having eaten, or lain, or done those other things with too much delicacy . . . Who, then, would bear with this? . . . O Pleasure! Who would endure thee?”⁶² In the *Characteristics*, he also warns that over-indulgence in voluptuousness inevitably leads to corruption, effeminacy, and slavery to the passions.⁶³

This equation of luxurious indulgence in pleasure with a loss of vigor, masculinity, and liberty echoes the critiques of the corrupting effects of luxury on the English body politic that dominated civic republican political discourse in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.⁶⁴ While disparagement of luxury was hardly limited to republican writers, to associate it with effeminacy and political corruption was to

⁶⁰ Shaftesbury, *An Inquiry* (1699) in Hemmerich and Bends, eds., *Standard Edition* 2:2, 288–89 (p. 180 in original); cf. Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 1:200.

⁶¹ Rand, ed., *The Life*, p. 50.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁶³ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 1:219–20; 2:95, 147–48, 203–7, 271.

⁶⁴ J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, N.J., 1975), pp. 430–31, 445, 466–67, and *Virtue, Commerce and History* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 114; see also Nigel Smith, “Popular Republicanism in the 1650s: John Streater’s ‘heroick mechanics,’” in *Milton and Republicanism*, ed. David Armitage, Armand Himy, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge, 1995), p. 150; David Armitage, “John Milton: Poet against Empire,” in Armitage, Himy, and Skinner, eds., *Milton and Republicanism*, pp. 208–9, 211, 223; M. M. Goldsmith, “Liberty, Luxury, and the Pursuit of Happiness,” in *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe*, ed. Anthony Pagden (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 225–51. For Shaftesbury’s relationship to this strand of political thought, see Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness*, pp. 124–53, and “Liberty, Manners, and Politeness,” pp. 593–98, 603–5; and Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), p. 6, 128–32.

perpetuate a long-standing trope whose roots ultimately lay in classical moral and political philosophy.⁶⁵ Although Shaftesbury's thought has been characterized as an attempt to "legitimate social and cultural complexity [and] to accept them as something other than 'corruption' and 'luxury,'" we should not forget that the latter terms remained opprobrious in the highest degree to him.⁶⁶ Certainly Shaftesbury never used the term "polite luxury," as did Saint-Évremond.⁶⁷ Instead, he spoke of the supposed complexities of good taste and polite culture as being in fact quite simple, plain, and natural.⁶⁸ Corruption results from indulging in the wrong sorts of pleasures—to wit, the luxurious and the unnatural.

In order to distinguish between the pleasures which result from good taste and those which corrupt, the *Inquiry concerning Virtue* provides a taxonomy of pleasures. Shaftesbury first separates the pleasures of the body from those of the mind. The latter are judged to be superior because they can endure indefinitely while sensual pleasures remain dependent on only evanescent stimulation. He also subordinates self-centered pleasure from those other-devoted pleasures which are the product of "natural affections." Mental delight is then described as necessarily other-centered, for it results from "the love of truth, proportion, order and symmetry in the things without." By unifying mental pleasure with the natural affections, Shaftesbury connects self pleasure with the harmony of society as a whole. Just as the mind is superior to matter, he claims, society is greater than the self. Thus he removes the twin pillars for libertine apologies for relentless pursuit of sensual pleasure—that is, philosophical materialism and egoism. But he continues: "Speculative pleasure . . . must yet be far surpassed by *virtuous motion*, and the exer-

⁶⁵ Christopher Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 45–86, esp. 58–59, 66–67, and 118–20 on Shaftesbury. Christian criticisms of luxury tended to focus on its association with lust, see Berry, *The Idea of Luxury*, pp. 87–98; and William Ames, *Conscience with the Power and Cases Thereof, Divided into Five Bookes* (London, 1641), bk. 5, chap. 39.

⁶⁶ Klein, "Liberty, Manners, and Politeness," p. 605; Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 1:92–93, 313; see also Shaftesbury's disparaging comparison between Dutch "frugality and public good" and English "luxury and corruption": Rand, ed., *The Life*, p. 368.

⁶⁷ Saint-Évremond, in *Miscellany Essays*, 2 vols. (London, 1694), 1:243. For Évremond's praise of the *erudito luxu* of Petronius, see Saint-Évremond, *Oeuvres*, 4:18, and "The Life of Petronius Arbiter," in *The Works of Petronius Arbiter, in Prose and Verse*, trans. Joseph Addison (London, 1736), pp. 2–3. Compare Bernard Mandeville, *A Letter to Dion, Occasion'd by His Book Call'd Alciphron*, ed. J. Viner (1732; reprint, Los Angeles, 1953), p. 18.

⁶⁸ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 1:215–18; see also Barrell, ed., "Le refuge français," pp. 75–77, 161, cf. 247–51. Praise for simplicity of thought is commonplace in eighteenth-century criticism. See *Spectator*, no. 70 (21 May 1711), in G. G. Smith, ed., 1:263–68; no. 74 (25 May 1711), 1:279–84; and T. E. B. Wood, *The Word "Sublime" and Its Context, 1650–1760* (Paris, 1972), pp. 76–77, 86, 94.

cise of benignity and goodness.” Virtue must be the greatest pleasure, and it is active in contrast to those sensual “low and sordid pleasures of human kind” which are passive.⁶⁹

It is important to understand the reasons why Shaftesbury singles out mental and social delight as the greatest of pleasures. They are enduring and active. Now the keystone to classical republican thought, according to J. G. A. Pocock, is the struggle of the virtuous republic to maintain its vigor against inevitable decay over time. Pocock notes that the republicans’ solution to this dilemma was to advocate “a *vita activa* which is specifically a *vivere civile*—a way of life given over to civic concerns and the (ultimately political) activity of citizenship.”⁷⁰ Shaftesbury applies a similar solution to the threat posed by corruption to the self, rather than to the republic, but with one major difference: for him, an active and civic life is also ultimately a philosophical one, a *vita contemplativa*, and thus he rejects the martial ideals so dear to many of his country whig allies.⁷¹ In a letter to James Stanhope in November 1709, Lord Ashley stated, “I don’t only esteem philosophy and letters to be the good nourishment and preservative of the patriot and statesman, but of the hero, and that there is not, nor ever can be, a truly great man in either way without this diet.”⁷²

Shaftesbury’s ideal republic is therefore closer to that of Plato’s *kallipolis* than Machiavelli’s Rome. In his “Exercises,” he disparages both libertine heroism and that of the warrior. He asks himself, “The pleasures of the debauch, amours with women; the basking of a fowl on a dung-hill; the crowing and victory of the cocks; the State victories; the campaign victories. Would I live this life? Would I live a dog? Would I be a wolf, a sheep, a goat? . . . Eating . . . venery . . . playing . . . Have I known anything better? Have I been a man?”⁷³ True masculinity is defined in stark opposition to the bestial, appetitive characteristics of the rake or the soldier. Shaftesbury’s ideal citizen, then, is not the bellicose freeholder of Harrington’s *Oceana* or Sidney’s *Discourses*. He is rather a “sociable enthusiast” for philosophy. The vigorous virtue attributed to the man of arms in seventeenth-century republican thought is attributed instead to the man of letters in Shaftesbury’s works.⁷⁴

By locating masculinity in philosophic activity, “effeminacy” ob-

⁶⁹ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 1:293–94, 296, emphasis mine.

⁷⁰ Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, p. 56.

⁷¹ The locus classicus for this sentiment is found in Cicero’s *De officiis*, bk. 1.22–23. I am grateful to Markku Peltonen for reminding me of this.

⁷² Rand, ed., *The Life*, p. 414. See also Forster, ed., *Original Letters*, p. 186.

⁷³ Rand, ed., *The Life*, p. 258.

⁷⁴ Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness*, esp. pp. 143–50, establishes this definitively.

tains a rather different sense than it had for most of his fellow country whigs. Shaftesbury believes that effeminacy is indeed a consequence of luxurious corruption, the paradigm for which is the “horrid luxury and effeminacy of the Roman court.”⁷⁵ And it is characterized by weakness and lack of courage. Effeminacy is thus: “soft, delicate, supine, impotent in pleasure, in anger, talk; pusillanimous, light, changeable, etc.”⁷⁶ But most crucially, it is a lack of hard thinking and philosophical wisdom that makes one effeminate. Manhood, he declares, lies “in action or exercise” and in “reason and in a mind that this consists.”⁷⁷

It is important to recognize that philosophic masculinity for Shaftesbury is no less active for being contemplative. The third earl was no proponent of retirement from the world of civic duty. Despite his love for gardens and the natural world, he did not believe, as did Sir William Temple, that one could achieve self-fulfillment by remaining in one’s garden.⁷⁸ Lord Ashley thought that “he who truly studies nature . . . needs not a garden to contemplate and admire.”⁷⁹ Although he despised the court, he did not shirk political responsibility. He remained throughout his life a committed defender of the Protestant succession and an opponent of French pretensions to universal monarchy.⁸⁰ His paradigmatic philosopher-hero was therefore “the Xenophonic version of Socrates,” who embodied “the active ideal of philosophy” as “a civic philosopher integrating thought and action.”⁸¹

Yet in his zealousness to represent the philosopher as a hero,

⁷⁵ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 2:169, 204; cf. Algernon Sidney, *Discourses concerning Government*, ed. Thomas G. West (1698; reprint, Indianapolis, 1990), pp. 164–66.

⁷⁶ Rand, ed., *The Life*, p. 216.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, *The Life*, p. 51.

⁷⁸ William Temple, “Upon the Garden of Epicurus; or, Of Gardening, in the Year 1685,” in *Five Miscellaneous Essays by Sir William Temple*, ed. Samuel H. Monk (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1963), pp. 1–36.

⁷⁹ Rand, ed., *The Life*, p. 121; cf. *ibid.*, p. 247. Shaftesbury’s hortulan philosophy did have an ethical component: John Dixon Hunt, “Hortulan Affairs,” in *Samuel Hartlib and Universal Reformation: Studies in Intellectual Communication*, ed. Mark Greengrass, Michael Leslie, and Timothy Raylor (Cambridge, 1994), p. 339. On the third earl’s own gardens, see Cartwright, ed., *Wentworth Papers*, p. 59; and David Leatherbarrow, “Character, Geometry and Perspective: The Third Earl of Shaftesbury’s Principles of Garden Design,” *Journal of Garden History* 4, no. 4 (1984): 332–58.

⁸⁰ Shaftesbury’s long correspondence with Benjamin Furley documents these concerns; Forster, ed., *Original Letters*, esp. pp. 116–17; and Rand, ed., *The Life*, p. 96. See Steven Pincus, “The English Debate over Universal Monarchy,” in *A Union for Empire: Political Thought and the British Union of 1707*, ed. John Robertson (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 37–62, *Protestantism and Patriotism* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 351–78, and “From Butterboxes to Wooden Shoes: The Shift in English Popular Sentiment from Anti-Dutch to Anti-French in the 1670s,” *Historical Journal* 38, no. 2 (1995): 333–61, for the Restoration-era origins of this sort of Francophobia.

⁸¹ Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness*, p. 108.

Shaftesbury resorts to using much the same language as that of those libertines he tries so hard to denounce in his moralizing. Although Shaftesbury emphasizes the superiority of “dry, sober reason” over “mere pleasure,” he claims just a few pages later that philosophical “pleasure is more debauching than any other” and it is, indeed, “a sublime, heroic passion.” There is a central paradox in Shaftesbury’s treatment of philosophical *eros*: he consistently opposes it to the *eros* of sexual desire, yet he just as consistently describes it in sexually charged terms. Shaftesbury elides the tension between discipline and transgression by describing his philosophizing as “a fair and plausible enthusiasm” and “a reasonable ecstasy,” but the contradictions between the nouns and their adjectives in these terms refuse to disappear.⁸²

III. Cool Conquest, Warm Poetry: Seduced by the Philosophic Sublime

Shaftesbury’s fifth treatise in the *Characteristics*, “The Moralists, a Philosophical Rhapsody” (1705; rev. ed. 1708/9) perhaps best demonstrates his highly eroticized philosophic ideal. He held this work in particularly high regard; it was located, along with the revised “Inquiry concerning Morals,” in the central second volume of the original three volumes of the *Characteristics*, and he considered it to be “a kind of apology for [the revised “Inquiry”].”⁸³ It was obviously intended to be the keystone of Shaftesbury’s philosophical edifice, and it is here where we find the clearest expression of his engagement with the languages of libertinism.

The treatise provides a retelling of a philosophical dialogue primarily between the narrator, Philocles, and the story’s heroic protagonist, Theocles.⁸⁴ Philocles is a skeptic, “an airy gentleman of the world and a thorough *railleur*,” while Theocles voices Shaftesbury’s philosophy in the manner of a “feigned preacher.” Theocles is troped as the more masculine of the two, for he remains in control of the discourse at all times, and Philocles speaks in obvious admiration for his “heroic genius.” Philocles, on the other hand, worries over his effeminacy. He says his skepticism is owing to his love of easy thinking. Indolence is a distinctly feminine characteristic for Shaftesbury, as he later has Philocles

⁸² Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 2:33, 36, 129.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 2:274; cf. *ibid.*, p. 161.

⁸⁴ Shaftesbury claims that he consciously rejected the “direct way of dialogue” in the piece because that is a base form fit only for the “burlesque divinity” of church controversy; *Characteristics*, 2:337.

complain that “I was not so effeminate and weak a friend as to deserve that he should treat me like a woman; nor had I shown such an aversion to his manners or conversation as to be thought fitter for the dull luxury of a soft bed and ease than for business, recreation, or study with an early friend.”⁸⁵

This distinction between Theocles the masculine philosopher and Philocles the effeminate skeptic heightens the erotic tension of the narrative. Often the tenor of the dialogue between the two tends to resemble less a Socratic *elenchus* than the playful banter between a rake and his coy mistress. Thus when Theocles finally succeeds in persuading Philocles of the truth of his beliefs, the act becomes a sort of seduction. In terms of genre, Shaftesbury merges the classical colloquy with the libertine heroism of Restoration comedy.⁸⁶

“The Moralists” is suffused with amatory language. Philocles begins his account by equating the “fine romantic passion” of lovers and philosophers: “No matter what the object was, whether poetry, music, philosophy, or the fair. All who were enamored anyway were in the *same* condition.”⁸⁷ The dialogue demonstrates this equation between philosophical and erotic *eros* as Philocles and Theocles carry on their discourse in a frankly homoerotic manner. When the two are finally alone, Theocles says to Philocles “there is hope you may in time become a lover with me, for you already begin to show jealousy.” “Truly,” responds Philocles, “my jealousy and love regard you only,” and he continues, “I want no nymph to make me happy here, unless it were perhaps to join forces against you, in the manner your beloved poet makes the nymph Ægle join with his two youths in forcing the God Silenus to sing to them.” The reference here is to Virgil’s Sixth *Eclogue*, yet the image of Silenus as both satyr and philosopher also recalls Alcibiades’ famous speech on Socrates as Silenus in Plato’s *Symposium*.⁸⁸ Theocles, like his Socratic archetype, is made a lustful, priapic, and yet philosophical lover. He takes offense at the comparison, however, perhaps voicing Shaftesbury’s own uneasiness with the libertine role. Theocles denies that he could resemble one who revels in drunken debauchery and insinuates to

⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 335, 27, 18, 95.

⁸⁶ Max Novak, “Margaret Pinchwife’s ‘London Disease’: Restoration Comedy and the Libertine Offensive of the 1670s,” *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 10 (1977): 1–23.

⁸⁷ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 2:3, emphasis mine; cf. ibid., 1:92.

⁸⁸ Virgil, *Eclogue* 6, esp. lines 13–30; cf. Plato, *Symposium* 215B–222C; the image also appears in Xenophon, *Symposium* 4.19. The representation of Bacchus in the figure of a Silenus was not unfamiliar to Shaftesbury’s contemporaries, see BL, Sloane MS 3961, fol. 87r; and BL Add. MS 40060, fol. 1v.

Philocles that if the latter were to enjoy such company, he would surely not be interested in philosophizing.⁸⁹ This oblique reference to sexual dalliance serves further to reinforce the gallantry of the repartee as well as to further emphasize Philocles' own effeminacy. It should be remembered that Shaftesbury's understanding of effeminacy encompasses submission of the will to the passions, especially the amorous ones. Philocles's undisciplined sexuality paradoxically becomes yet another sign of his feminine inferiority to Theocles's own unquestioned masculinity.

What then should we make of Shaftesbury's repeated insistences that the resemblance between amorous gallantry and the philosophical sort in "The Moralists" is only superficial? Theocles consistently uses "amorous gallants" and "modern epicures" as vulgar foils to contrast against "that notion of divine love such as separates from everything worldly, sensual, or meanly interested." Yet these carefully wrought distinctions cannot help but become blurred by the dialogue's homoerotic word play. This confusion is most apparent at the narrative climax, where Philocles abandons his skepticism and wholly concedes to Theocles. Philocles exclaims, "Enough . . . my doubts are vanished. . . . You [Theocles] are conqueror in the cool way of reason, and may with honor now grow warm again in your poetic vein."⁹⁰ Theocles's victory is intended to be strictly a matter of Socratic persuasion, but the scene also recalls the libertine's search for valor and a regeneration of creative energy, or heat, through the erotic sublimity of seduction.⁹¹ At this point, there is little difference between the enthusiastic philosopher and a rake. For both Shaftesbury and his libertine counterpart, erotic heat is a source of creative inspiration—a transgression sanctioned for the virtuosic few who can use it properly to achieve an end higher than merely slaking one's lust.

Shaftesbury nevertheless treats this passionate "heat" with caution. Just before his victory, Theocles wavers in his purpose when Philocles warns, "Since you have *rekindled* me, you do not by delaying give me time to cool again." This provokes Theocles to respond by declaring, "I scorn to take the advantage of a warm fit and be beholden to temper or imagination for gaining me your assent. Therefore, ere I go a step farther, I am resolved to enter into *cool reason* with you."⁹² To be legitimate, Theocles' conquest must be calm, cool, and rational and thus presumably opposed to hot and passionate erotic seduction.

⁸⁹ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 2:96.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 42, 32, 54, 110.

⁹¹ This topos is brilliantly explored in Turner, "The Libertine Sublime," and "Il-lustrious Depravity."

⁹² Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 2:107, emphasis mine.

Cool conquest nevertheless clears the way for warm poetic passion. Hence Theocles' sublime rhapsody immediately follows. He claims to view the natural world with "indifference, remote from the antipathy of sense," but he also asks permission to "range thus at pleasure . . . where my capricious fancy or easy faith has led me."⁹³ There remains an unresolved tension here between disinterested, cool reason and warm, passionate enthusiasm which pervades Shaftesbury's treatment of sublimity.

According to Theocles, rational disinterestedness is the perspective of the whole natural order rather than that of any one particular part of that order. He claims that disinterested understanding allows one to recognize beauty in even "the darkest and most imperfect parts" of nature. All that is natural is good. Hence for Theocles, "the wildness pleases," and he finds sublime beauty in the only apparently threatening vastness of mountains and forests.⁹⁴ As a part of the natural order they have "a magnificence beyond the formal mockery of princely gardens."⁹⁵ While the sublime may be pretentious imposture in human art, it is awesome and truly beautiful in nature. There is no distinction between the sublime and the beautiful for Shaftesbury.⁹⁶

Now this conception of sublimity is quite different from the libertine sublime described by James Turner, for it locates awesomeness in contemplation of the natural order rather than the heroic action of sexual conquest. But Turner's libertine eroticism is never wholly ignored in Shaftesbury's sublime. Although he notes that, besides his philosophical enthusiasts, "the only people who are enamoured in this way . . . are your poor vulgar lovers," he insists that the amours of his philosopher-heroes should not be conflated with those of the vulgar sort. There is a hierarchy of beauties to which the different passions of desire must conform: "Whatever in Nature is beautiful or charming is only the faint shadow of that first beauty," thus one must "never . . . admire the representative beauty except for the sake of the original, nor aim at any enjoyment than of the rational kind." So poor, vulgar, and libertine, lovers fail to rise beyond their admiration of the shadows and never even begin to appreciate the first and only true beauty. A few pages later, Theocles famously proclaims that "the beautifying, not the beautified, is the really beautiful." The aesthetics are Platonic, but his language is libertine, at

⁹³ Ibid., pp. 111, 114.

⁹⁴ Ibid., pp. 119, 122. Shaftesbury's defense of the beauty of vastness may have been a response to Saint-Evremond's criticisms of the aesthetics of the vast in *Miscellaneous Essays* (London, 1692), pp. 302–32; original in *Oeuvres en prose*, 3:375–417.

⁹⁵ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 2:125.

⁹⁶ Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (New York, 1959), pp. 299–300, 323.

least insofar as it tropes philosophical *eros* as amorous and insofar as it describes the goals of that philosophy as ecstasy or rapture. Shaftesbury later states that “there is a power in numbers, harmony, proportion, and beauty of every kind, which naturally captivates the heart, and raises the imagination to an opinion or conceit of something majestic and divine.”⁹⁷ In this view, the cool, rational, and disinterested appreciation of beautifying ideals should provoke a warm, passionate, and enthusiastic response in the philosopher’s breast.

The rhapsodic sections of the treatise have long been recognized as Shaftesbury’s contribution to the aesthetics of the sublime. In these sections, it has been claimed, he locates sublimity in the natural world rather than in the Longinian field of rhetoric.⁹⁸ Yet it is not at all clear where the rhetoric ends and the natural sublimity begins in the dialogue, for, it should be remembered, the rhapsodies are part of Theocles’ (rhetorical) attempt to reveal the wondrous unity and completeness of the natural order to Philocles. Theocles’ lofty speeches attempt to convey the sublimity of a divine order which cannot “be contemplated without ecstasy and rapture.”⁹⁹ Shaftesbury therefore does *not* abandon the rhetorical in favor of the natural sublime, but he rather incorporates both in the rhapsodies of his philosopher-hero Theocles.

Shaftesbury knew that by playing with the sublime, he was figuratively playing with fire. The potency of the Augustan discourse of sublimity was due to its ability to connote both aesthetic and sybaritic pleasures at the same time, and this remained a continual source of anxiety for the third earl.¹⁰⁰ At the conclusion of his first rhapsody, Theocles again voices his uneasiness with passionate heat. He states, “I was growing too warm. . . . And here perhaps I might have talked yet more mysteriously, had you been one who could think otherwise than in the common way of the soft flames of love. . . . But in these high flights I might

⁹⁷ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 2:125, 126, 131, 174.

⁹⁸ On the rhapsodic genre, see Pat Rogers, “Shaftesbury and the Aesthetics of Rhapsody,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 12, no. 3 (Summer 1972): 244–57; on Shaftesbury’s sublime, see Samuel H. Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* (1935; reprint, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1960), pp. 59–60, 208–10; Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory*, pp. 289–300; R. L. Brett, *The Third Earl of Shaftesbury: A Study in Eighteenth-Century Literary Theory* (London, 1951), pp. 145–64. Wood, *The Word Sublime*, demonstrates the difficulty of separating the rhetorical from other notions of the sublime, albeit without reference to Shaftesbury.

⁹⁹ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 1:279.

¹⁰⁰ For the combination of aesthetic and hedonistic senses of the word “sublime,” see George Etherege to Henry Guy, 28 December 1687, in *Letters of Sir George Etherege*, ed. Frederick Bracher (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1974), p. 166. James G. Turner notes suggestively that in the Augustan milieu, “the word ‘sublime’ seems to have been drinking-club slang, used somewhat like ‘high’ in the 1960s,” in “The Libertine Sublime,” p. 113, n. 10.

possibly have gone near to burn my wings.’’ Even for Theocles, passionate speech, like religious enthusiasm, always carries with it the danger of slipping from the heights of sublimity to the depths of incomprehensible and irrational mysticism. It therefore ‘‘requires a steady rein and strict hand’’ to control it. It is certainly not for the vulgar masses. ‘‘To all tyros,’’ the third earl forbade ‘‘the forward use of admiration, rapture, or ecstasy, even in the subjects they esteemed the highest and most divine.’’ Whereas Theocles revels in his ‘‘vein of enthusiasm’’ for ‘‘the sublime,’’ Shaftesbury elsewhere criticizes the primitive, childish sublime favored by the rabble.¹⁰¹

Truly philosophic sublimity was therefore esoteric. Theocles insists that the ‘‘sordidly luxurious’’ desires and pleasures of ‘‘the inferior creatures’’ are ‘‘of a far different kind’’ than the desires of those for whom enjoyment is fundamentally rational. No pleasure can ‘‘be of real force where it is un contemplated, unjudged of, unexamined, and stands only as the accidental note or token of what appeases provoked sense, and satisfies the brutish part.’’ Brutes, Theocles declares, are ‘‘incapable of knowing and enjoying beauty.’’ The refined taste of the virtuoso philosopher, however, can relish the ‘‘tasteful food, and feel those other joys of sense in common with’’ the brutes.¹⁰²

What then distinguishes a refined Theocles from a brutish libertine? In the essay ‘‘Sensus Communis,’’ Shaftesbury again attempts to clarify the difference. He claims that ‘‘every one is a virtuoso of a higher or lower degree. Every one pursues a Grace and courts a Venus of one kind or another. The *venus-tum*, the *honestum*, the *decorum* of things will force its way. They who refuse to give it scope in the nobler subjects of a rational and moral kind will find its prevelency elsewhere in an inferior order of things.’’ Desire is the common denominator. The virtuous philosopher is distinguished from the vile libertine merely by their respective objects of desire. ‘‘Slender would be the enjoyments of the lover, the ambitious man, the warrior, or the virtuoso,’’ Shaftesbury proclaims, ‘‘if in the beauties which they admire and passionately pursue there were no reference or regard to any higher majesty or grandeur than what simply results from the particular objects of their pursuit.’’¹⁰³

Yet the boundary between base and noble is not always as carefully policed as Shaftesbury insists. He is never content to simply reject mere sensual pleasure as inferior to rational contemplation and leave it at that.

¹⁰¹ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 2:118, 178, 114, 124; 1:142, 157, 160, 165, 168–69. Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness*, pp. 203–6, 209, reads Shaftesbury as wholly antithetic to the aesthetics of the sublime by focusing only on these statements.

¹⁰² Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 2:127–28, 142–43, 128.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 1:92, 2:175.

Instead he often juxtaposes the two. Thus Venus occurs as a symbol for erotic desire of both the sexual and the rational sort in the *Characteristics*.¹⁰⁴ The effect is an emphasis on the semantic proximity of libertine eroticism to Shaftesbury's own rational eroticism: "Even in the Arts, which are mere imitations of that outward grace and beauty, we not only confess a taste, but make it a part of refined breeding to discover amidst the many false manners and ill styles the true and natural one, which represents the real beauty and Venus of the kind." Lord Ashley insists that the Venus of his desire is "true and natural," thereby actually recalling its relationship to the false and unnatural Venus of lustful venery. He continually insists that a passion for the true and natural Venus is *not* the same as libertine antinomianism. Shaftesburian "free thought and latitude of understanding" is cast as a positive freedom to pursue the good, the true, and the beautiful rather than a negative freedom from restraint which allows "debauch, corruption, and depravity." And he chastises his critics who "confound licentiousness in morals with liberty in thought and action, and make the libertine, who has least mastery of himself, resemble his direct opposite."¹⁰⁵ Although Shaftesbury always insists that his philosophical passion is superior to the libertines' venereal passions, the generic similitude between the two is also paradoxically reinscribed with each insistence on their difference.

IV. Shaftesbury in the Midst of Gallantry and Pleasure

How then should we understand Shaftesbury's relationship to the languages in which libertine notions were expressed? He certainly cannot be easily labeled a "libertine" of either the rakish or the refined, neop Epicurean sort—he was far too celibate for the former and far too much of a stoic for the latter. Nevertheless, he was an "erudite" libertine at least to the extent that he believed and participated in an esoteric, free-thinking circle in which homoerotic love and homosocial philosophy could be closely associated.

Shaftesbury's libertinism was ultimately a discursive pose. There is a raffishness of style, albeit platonic, as well as a highly erotic content, however esoteric and exclusively *homoerotic*, to his writings, both of which belie his strident condemnations of the libertinism of his contemporaries. Shaftesbury allows for a sort of virtuoso's dispensation that sanctions the philosopher-hero to transcend the ordinary restrictions that

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 1:16, 92. Augustan images of Venus are examined in James G. Turner, "The Sexual Politics of Landscape: Images of Venus in Eighteenth-Century English Poetry and Landscape Gardening," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 11 (1982): 343–66.

¹⁰⁵ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 1:217; 2:345, 346.

obtain for the vulgar masses. Thus what he would have considered libertine transgression, or enthusiastic cant, for the impolite is permitted, indeed even celebrated, among those few men he considered to be truly virtuous philosophers. Like the French *libertins érudits* of the seventeenth century, or the *philosophes* of the eighteenth, the third earl understood that transgression often requires discretion.¹⁰⁶ But Shaftesbury did not accept “the distinction between the high voluptuary, who turns sex into a conscious work of art, and the low debauchee who is little better than an animal” that James Turner sees as “the central theme of a century of libertine texts.”¹⁰⁷ Rather than aestheticizing erotic experience, he eroticizes aesthetic and philosophic experience.¹⁰⁸ The distinction is important: while Shaftesbury sometimes spoke the language of libertinism, he vehemently denied that the content of his philosophy was itself libertine.

Furthermore, the understanding of Shaftesbury’s idealist eroticism, as it were, presented here calls into question recent characterizations of Shaftesbury as the preeminent philosopher of politeness in the public sphere of post-1688 Britain. To be sure, Lord Ashley’s was a philosophy for which concepts of decorum, propriety, manners, and good taste were all fundamental. He did “understand [the public sphere’s] workings in terms of politeness.”¹⁰⁹ But Shaftesbury’s politeness, as opposed to the ideal upheld by many of his contemporaries, was a highly rarefied quality, and his vision of who should be included in the public sphere was far more restrictive than that of many of his fellow whig ideologists.¹¹⁰

Very few people could pass the high standards set by the third earl. Not the least of these qualifications was that one had to be a man. His exclusive male friendships—not the urban and urbane world of either London’s Town or its City, and not the public world of print culture and the periodical press—provided the context in which Shaftesbury articu-

¹⁰⁶ On the esoteric nature of some forms of libertine sociability, see Pintard, *Le libertinage érudit*, pp. 121–22; Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York, 1995), p. 107; Margaret Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons, and Republicans* (London, 1981); David S. Shields, “Anglo-American Clubs: Their Wit, Their Heterodoxy, Their Sedition,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 51, no. 2 (April 1994): 304; and Trumbach, “Erotic Fantasy,” pp. 271–82.

¹⁰⁷ Turner, “The Culture of Priapism,” p. 9; cf. Turner, “‘Illustrious Depravity,’” pp. 10–11.

¹⁰⁸ Trumbach, “Erotic Fantasy,” pp. 271–82, esp. 281, conflates Shaftesbury’s “program of the virtuoso” with the later libertinism of John Cleland and Francis Dashwood.

¹⁰⁹ Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness*, p. 14.

¹¹⁰ Lawrence Klein recognizes that “the term ‘politeness’ had a wide range of uses,” in the early eighteenth century in his “Property and Politeness in the Early Eighteenth-Century Whig Moralists,” in Brewer and Staves, eds., *Early Modern Conceptions of Property*, p. 228.

lated his thought.¹¹¹ He disparaged the West End's "beau monde" and "the coffee-house world" celebrated in the *Spectator* papers and inveighed against "the reigning genius of gallantry and pleasure" that he perceived in those circles.¹¹² Yet within his private coterie, Lord Ashley could play with the rhetoric and poses often associated with the libertine. Since his philosophy required and inspired passion from its adherents, eroticism was just as important as politeness to the third earl's thought.

If Shaftesbury's idealist eroticism cannot offer an apology for rakish hedonism, neither is it simply the consequence of an intense immersion in, and attempt to emulate the style of, the works of the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers for whom homoeroticism was a part of everyday life. Shaftesbury was not unique among his contemporaries in his admiration for, and emulation of, classical ideals. Yet he was unique in the ways in which he found that the homosocial, as well as the homoerotic, themes and values found in those texts spoke to his condition and his own, perhaps increasingly unfashionable, social inclinations.

Nor was Shaftesbury's libertine language merely an overenthusiastic expression of early modern conventions and formalities of male friendship among the social elite. Although expressions of love and passionate friendship were indeed commonplace among elite males, such professions were not mere formalities, simple conventions, or platitudes. Love was a serious matter between men, and it implied a strong and not easily violable relationship of mutual obligation and affection between the parties involved.

It is important also to recognize that Shaftesbury's rhetorical libertinism and his forthright advocacy of masculine love are equally prominent both in the public essays of the *Characteristics* and in his private writings. This continuity implies that Shaftesbury was not afraid that his homoeroticism could be construed as improper, let alone sodomitical, and indeed he was never accused of such an offense. If the third earl could adopt libertine conceptions of erotic experience and put them to such definitively unlibertine purposes as neo-Stoic ethics or neoplatonic aesthetics, then we must recognize that the linguistic maneuvers—the tropes, the themes, and the models—of libertinism were extremely malleable and sometimes quite distinct from the actual practices of rakish libertinism. One need not have been a rake to speak the language of libertinism.

¹¹¹ Shaftesbury did not approve of unnecessary visits to London by his family; Voitle, *The Third Earl*, p. 82. David Marshall imaginatively explores the significance of the ways in which Shaftesbury "denies the public character of his published book," in the *Characteristics* in *The Figure of Theater*, pp. 1–33, quote at p. 18.

¹¹² Rand, ed., *The Life*, p. 68; Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 2:4. See also Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 2:165, 327–330.